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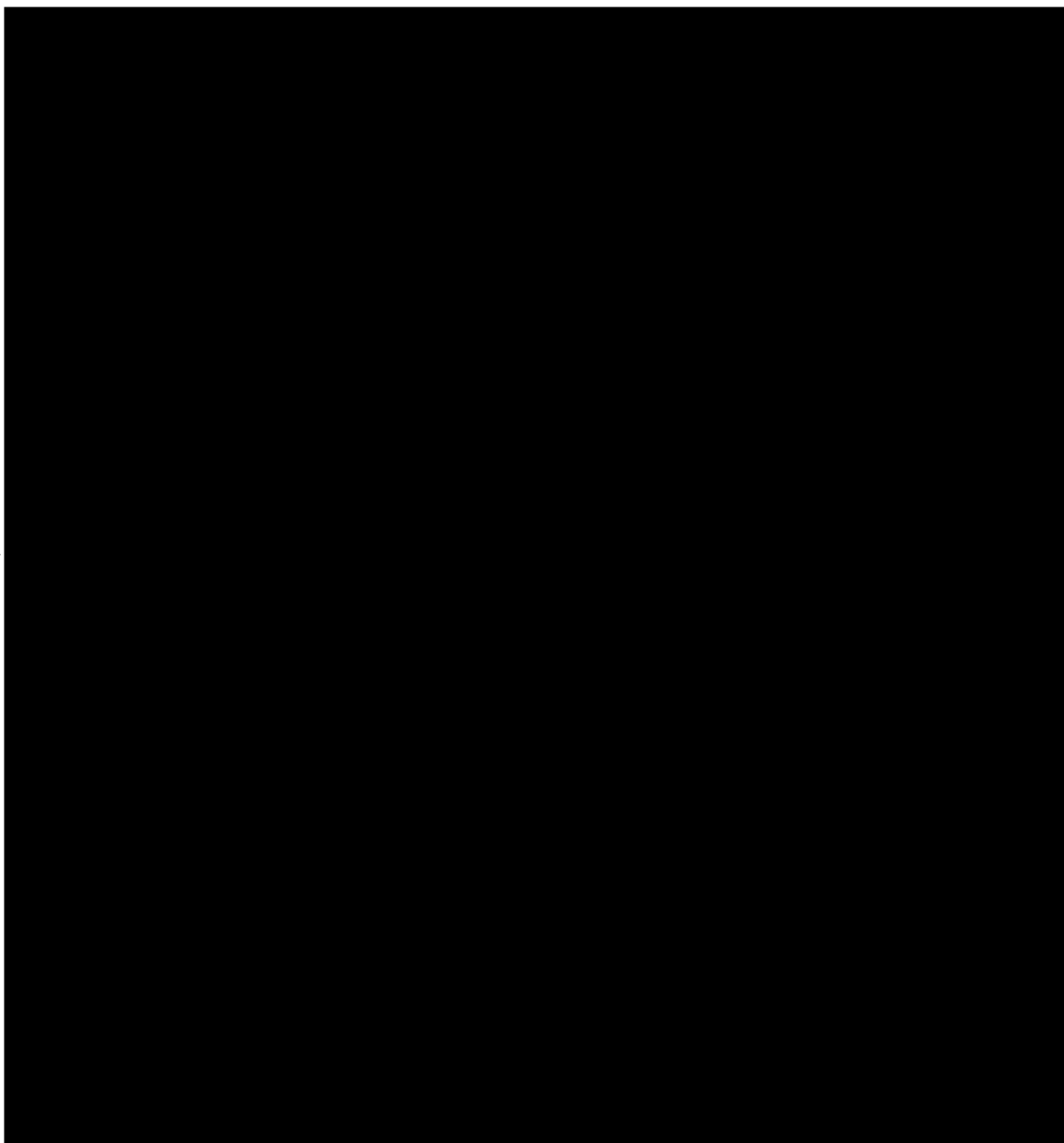
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Bhutan: Trouble in a Himalayan Shangri-la [REDACTED]

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The development of a small but vocal prodemocracy movement in Bhutan has led to violent unrest there and complicated the country's relations with India and Nepal. The movement is spearheaded by ethnic Nepalese Hindus who believe the Buddhist monarch in Bhutan is systematically discriminating against them. [REDACTED]

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Bhutan: Trouble in a Himalayan Shangri-La

The development of a small but vocal prodemocracy movement in the tiny Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan has led to violent unrest there and complicated the country's relations with India and Nepal. The movement is spearheaded by ethnic Nepalese Hindus who believe the Buddhist monarchy in Bhutan is systematically discriminating against them. Nepalese sympathizers in India and Nepal are supporting the dissidents, although both governments officially view the unrest as an internal matter. The present agitation is unlikely to topple King Jigme Wangchuck, because the dissidents lack the numbers, organization, and equipment to present a serious challenge. The Bhutanese ruler, however, will almost certainly be faced with long-term unrest.

Hints of Trouble

Bhutan's tranquil political scene has been upset recently by minority Nepalese who have launched a "prodemocracy" movement, accusing the government of ethnic discrimination, according to press reports. We believe much of the current unrest stems from Jigme Wangchuck's "Bhutanization" program launched last year to counter influences brought by foreign workers and modernization. Under the decree, teaching Nepali is illegal in schools, all citizens must wear traditional Drupka clothing, women must cut their hair short in Drupka fashion, and television antennas and satellite dishes are banned to prevent the Nepalese minority in the south from receiving foreign television. Violators are fined heavily and sometimes imprisoned.

The program has outraged many ethnic Nepalese, who believe they are playing a crucial role in developing Bhutan. Nepalese were further angered, according to press reports, when Bhutanese leaders recently admitted the country "fiddled" its population figures upon joining the United Nations, probably in part to minimize the number of ethnic Nepalese in the country. The admission comes as the government is conducting its first official census, which many Nepalese fear will be used to question their right of residence in Bhutan. Although the government denies this, press reports say

A Peaceful Mountain Land

Bhutan is situated between India and Tibet in the eastern Himalayan Mountains. The kingdom had virtually no contact with the outside world until 1960 when it launched a modernization program. Development priorities have included transportation, education, health, and light industry. Bhutan, however, remains one of the most traditional and least developed countries in the world. The large majority of the population is illiterate and rural, living on subsistence agriculture and pastoral pursuits in a largely barter economy. Estimates vary substantially, but the population probably numbers about 1.6 million. The ruling Drupkas—Buddhists of Tibetan origin—live primarily in the north, while 35 to 45 percent of the population are of Nepalese Hindu origin and live mostly in the south. Many came to Bhutan after 1960 primarily as laborers for its development program.

Bhutan's political system revolves around a hereditary monarchy. The royal family has ruled since 1907. Bhutan gained independence from India in August 1949, but New Delhi exercises some foreign policy influence by treaty. In 1953 Jigme Wangchuck's father established a 150-member national assembly, whose members are either elected or appointed by the government or religious leaders. The assembly can make laws, but the King retains the right of review. There is no written constitution or bill of rights. Internal security is maintained by the Royal Bhutan Police and the Royal Bhutan Army, which consists of about 8,000 lightly armed troops.

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the government has expelled tens of thousands of Nepalese workers since 1987.

Shattering the Serenity

Communal tensions have escalated since early August, and several newly formed dissident groups have battled with the Army. In the largest incident to date, security forces and prodemocracy demonstrators clashed in at least six southern districts of the country between 20 and 25 September, according to press reports. The Bhutanese Embassy in New Delhi confirmed the clashes

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but reported only a few casualties on each side. Most other reports indicate significant civilian deaths:

- A Western correspondent told the [REDACTED] he believes security forces killed upwards of 400.
- A Japanese journalist reported at least 327 civilian deaths.
- Nepal-based human rights groups claim at least 319 civilians were killed. [REDACTED]

Bhutanese forces were more restrained during a second round of protests staged between 6 and 8 October. Press reports say several thousand Nepalese dissidents marched on a local government headquarters in Chirang, 70 kilometers southeast of Thimphu. The demonstrators presented officials with a list of demands including multiparty democracy, freedom of speech, and the right to wear Nepalese dress, including the traditional knife, the khukri. There were few casualties reported during these demonstrations. [REDACTED]

A United Opposition

[REDACTED] the Bhutanese opposition movement consists primarily of three groups: the Bhutan People's Party, the People's Forum for Human Rights, and the Student Union of Bhutan. Although Nepalese-origin dissidents dominate the organizations, members come from all of Bhutan's ethnic, social, and economic groups. Large numbers of dissidents have gone underground in recent years after fears of anti-Nepalese actions by the government.

Many of the dissidents operate from Nepal and India's West Bengal state—home of many ethnic Nepalese—[REDACTED]

There is widespread support for the dissidents in these areas. The People's Forum operates from Nepal, where it distributes reports of alleged Bhutanese abuses garnered from refugees. Thousands of dissidents have also formed base camps in West Bengal which they use to train new recruits and as staging areas for cross-border operations. [REDACTED]

Sluggish Government Response

The Bhutanese Government has sent mixed signals in response to the challenge. The initial tough response by security forces has been buttressed by the forming of

citizens' militias to fight the dissidents, according to press reports. The government claims more than 1,000

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people have volunteered, and the Army will soon begin to train them, according to press reporting. Press reports indicate Jigme Wangchuck wrote to the West Bengal state government and to the central government in New Delhi, asking authorities to clamp down on dissident activities staged from Indian soil. [REDACTED]

Recent statements have been more conciliatory, suggesting the King may be willing to compromise on some dissident demands to avoid a serious challenge to his throne. Recent overtures include an offer to meet with the dissidents and an invitation for international organizations to visit southern Bhutan and assess the human rights of ethnic Nepalese. The Minister of Home Affairs recently warned that dissident activities will not be tolerated indefinitely. According to press reports, Minister Namagel Wangchuck said, "If our persuasive methods fail, we will have to adopt strong-arm tactics...to maintain law and order in this country, whatever the cost." [REDACTED]

This vacillation reflects the King's apparent indecision in dealing with the unrest. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] reports he is worried about his future, given the experience of neighboring mountain kingdoms—Sikkim, annexed by India in 1974, and Nepal, where a prodemocracy movement sharply reduced the power of the monarchy earlier this year. A Western correspondent who met with the King recently told [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] that the Bhutanese ruler did not understand what the dissidents wanted. He said Bhutan offered a good social welfare system and asked little in return. "Bhutanization," according to the King, was necessary for the country to survive and was not meant to offend any group. [REDACTED]

Views From Afar

Nepal has refrained from public comment on the situation in Bhutan, probably because it fears legitimizing some form of Indian intervention. Nepal's Foreign Secretary told [REDACTED] that Nepal regarded the current situation as an internal Bhutanese matter. [REDACTED] reports the Nepalese Government perceives a close parallel with the events in Sikkim in 1974. In that case, ethnic Nepalese protesting in the name of democracy provided a rationale for New

Delhi's incorporation of the protectorate into India.

Although official reaction has been muted, the Nepalese Government is sympathetic to the dissidents. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Prime Minister Bhandari privately assured Bhutan People's Party leaders of his support for a prodemocracy movement in Bhutan. [REDACTED] the leader of the ruling Nepalese Congress Party accused the Bhutanese Government of "barbarous repression," warned of disaster should it continue its policy of confrontation, and urged the King to "pave the way for the establishment of a multiparty democracy in Bhutan." [REDACTED]

Indian officials in New Delhi are expressing strong support for Jigme Wangchuck, but they may have difficulty reining in dissident sympathizers in the West Bengal government. Despite a plea for Indian intervention by the leader of the Bhutan People's Party, India describes relations with Bhutan as "exceptionally good" and expresses "complete faith" in the King. [REDACTED]

The Indian and West Bengal governments are investigating Bhutan's allegations that local officials are helping the dissidents. [REDACTED] reports that two leftwing parties—which are part of West Bengal's ruling coalition—may be extending support, including asylum, to the dissidents. [REDACTED]

Outlook

We believe the situation in Bhutan will deteriorate, especially if Jigme Wangchuck persists in his "Bhutanization" efforts. The King may offer some token reforms in the face of unrest, but he is not likely to allow reforms that challenge his absolute rule. Direct intervention by either India or Nepal is unlikely. Ethnic Nepalese in India and Nepal, however, will almost certainly continue to provide assistance to the dissidents. The West Bengal government will probably alternate small crackdowns on the dissidents with benign neglect, depending on the pressure exerted by New Delhi. [REDACTED]

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